My Nights at the Museum

Recollections of the Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China, Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, 1975

by Jim U'Ren 2026-04-03 · 12:12

In the spring of 1975, I was a twenty-something economics student at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, living with my wife in an apartment on Rockhill Road, two blocks north of one of the finest art museums in the country. The Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum was just a short walk from our door — I passed it every day on my way to classes. It was a wonderful thing to live next door to a museum of this stature. When word came in early 1975 that an international exhibition was coming to the Nelson-Atkins, my feelings were mixed — excited, but wary of how the neighborhood would adjust to the anticipated activity. Those worries proved unfounded. In fact, we had no idea how fortunate we were — to find ourselves two blocks from a once-in-a-generation show, to witness a cultural event of historic significance, and to get a chance to work behind the scenes at the Nelson-Atkins.

That spring, the Nelson Gallery became the second American stop for *The Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China* — a sweeping, landmark show of cultural treasures from the East. After opening in Paris, the exhibit travelled to London, Vienna, Stockholm and Toronto. In the US, Washington saw it first. San Francisco would be the

last American stop. Kansas City was scheduled to be a seven-week engagement, and in the weeks leading up, the anticipation steadily grew.

The much anticipated collection of Chinese cultural artifacts arrived in early April 1975, in the midst of the Cold War and at a moment when the country was still processing a historic diplomatic shift. Official US Foreign Policy towards China was changing, and Americans were intrigued by a civilization that had been, for a generation, mostly invisible to Western eyes. The ancient artifacts, jade ornaments, silk textiles, and bronze sculptures that made up the Exhibit were not merely beautiful objects — they were dispatches from another world, arriving at a moment when the distance between worlds was, for the first time in decades, beginning to close.

I learned about the job the way young people always learn about jobs — through friends. Word spread among students at UMKC that several weeks into the Exhibit run, the museum was bringing on extra staff to handle the extraordinary volume of visitors it was drawing. The tip was vague — just that there was work available at the Nelson. I jumped at the chance to work at the Museum I passed every day — and to see how the Museum operated on the inside. I rushed to fill out an employment application and I got an interview within a few days.

When I arrived for the interview, I was greeted by a dignified, nicely dressed woman. She introduced herself, looked me over with calm, appraising eyes, and said simply: follow me. For the next two hours, she interviewed me while we did light gardening on the south side of the Museum — deadheading flowers, pulling the occasional weed, moving through the well-maintained garden at an unhurried pace while she

asked her questions. It was definitely the most unusual job interview I have ever had, before or since.

She was pleasant but measured, and it was clear from the start that this was not going to be your normal run-of-the-mill interview. She asked about my studies, my plans, where I saw myself going. There was a subtext to her questions that I could feel even as a young man not especially practiced at reading subtext: she was deciding whether I understood what I was being asked to be part of. At one point she stopped, turned to me, and said plainly: *You know, this is not just another after-hours janitorial job. This is the Chinese Exhibit at the Nelson-Atkins.*

She had read through my application and noted that I had some interior painting experience from summer jobs. She told me that touch-up painting of the exhibit walls would be part of the work — and then she asked me a question I was not expecting: Did I know how to paint with a dry brush?

I told her what I had been taught: never paint with a dry brush. I was trained to load the brush properly, to maintain a wet edge, to work methodically. A dry brush leaves streaks and misses.

She nodded as if she had expected that answer. Then she explained. This was different. The exhibit walls needed to look perfect when the doors opened each morning, but the large number of visitors were leaving marks, smudges and fingerprints on the walls of the galleries. Normal cleaning solutions did more harm than good. We needed to use paint to cover the traffic marks, but any paint applied during the night had to be fully dry before the first visitors arrived in the morning. The technique she was describing was deliberate and precise — with barely any paint on

the brush, just enough to cover a smudge or a fingerprint, working carefully into the surface so that it dried quickly and left no trace of having been applied at all. It was, in its way, a form of restoration. The goal was invisibility.

I told her I thought I could do that. She seemed satisfied. I had the job. I was told to report at 9 p.m. the next evening and that I would be working 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. — the graveyard shift.

The crowds were so large people often waited hours to get in, and they left their mark as crowds do. My task was to be part of a small team that moved through the temporary galleries after closing, cleaning smudges from the gallery walls, touching up scuff marks, restoring the exhibit space to its intended state before the next day's crowds arrived. Touch-up painting started immediately when we arrived each night so we could conclude painting as soon as possible to allow time for the paint to dry. Each of us carried a small container of paint for the touch-ups. From day one, the supervisor's instructions were clear and concise: take your time, don't rush, keep your brush dry, and err on the side of applying too little rather than too much paint. And then, with particular emphasis: do not — under any circumstances — spill paint on the red carpet. The walls could be touched up. The carpet could not.

The total transformation of the Museum for the Exhibit was itself something to behold. From the outside, the Nelson Gallery looked exactly as it always had — its neoclassical facade unchanged, stately and familiar. But the moment you stepped through the front doors, you were somewhere else entirely. Temporary exhibit walls had carved the grand interior into a new series of small galleries that were connected like a maze. The galleries were painted in a warm salmon color and underfoot

ran deep red carpet — together they created something wholly immersive — a world apart from the majestic marble and neutral tones of the familiar Nelson-Atkins. The curators had built a new world inside the old one.

The transformation was more than just visual — it was sounds from the Far East that completed the immersive journey.

As you first stepped into the Museum Exhibit, you were greeted by the unique and exotic sounds of Chinese bronze bells — the magical tones immediately transported visitors to another place, which was no doubt the intention. A recording of the bells played on a continuous loop, 24/7, throughout the entire Exhibit — deep, resonant, otherworldly tones that seemed to come from the walls themselves, from the air, from somewhere just out of reach. During the day, with the galleries full of visitors moving in small groups, the bells wove through the murmur of voices and the shuffle of feet to create something genuinely immersive. People were transported. You could see it on their faces.

But in the quiet hours of the night shift, the sound of the bells was something else altogether.

Alone in the Exhibit galleries in the still hours of the morning, brushing out fingerprints and smudges while ancient bronzes caught the low exhibition lighting and the bells rang on, the effect was not transcendence so much as a quiet eeriness. The artifacts did not seem diminished by the absence of an audience — if anything, they felt more present, more enduring. A bronze vessel cast thousands of years before did not require my admiration to be remarkable. It simply was what it was, patient and indifferent, outlasting dynasties and oceans and

whatever small concerns occupied an economics student in 1975 working the night shift at the Museum.

But the eerie, ghostly sounds of the bells echoing through the galleries were only part of it. The other part, the best part — the part that made the graveyard shift worth more than the pay — was that I got to really see and experience the Exhibit.

The Exhibit was a vast collection of ancient artifacts, timeless treasures, but the crown jewel of the Exhibition was the Galloping Horse, a Han Dynasty bronze of breathtaking lightness and motion, a horse in full stride with one hoof balanced impossibly on the back of a swallow in flight. The Galloping Horse, also known as the Flying Horse of Gansu, graced the cover of the Exhibit program. During public hours it drew such crowds that getting close to it was no small feat, and if you managed to get close, you found yourself too near to take it in properly — too close for perspective, surrounded by others straining for the same impossible view. You came away with a glimpse, a sliver of an impression more than an experience.

But in the peaceful, solitary hours we worked, the Galloping Horse was ours. No crowds, no jockeying for position, no roped perimeter of eager patrons. You could stand back and let your eyes find the thing whole — the impossible balance of it, the sculptor’s audacity in rendering speed and weightlessness in bronze. You could move around it, approach slowly, step back again. You could simply look, for as long as you wanted, in silence broken only by the bells. That was the unexpected gift of those hours at the Museum. The cleaning, the dry-brush touch-ups, the long stretches of quiet work through a sleeping Museum — all of it was secondary to those moments of unobstructed encounters with

magnificent works of historical art that the world outside was lining up for hours to glimpse.

The phenomenon of the Exhibition found its way into our home life too. Once it became known that we lived two blocks from a once-in-a-generation show, our small apartment on Rockhill Road became a kind of headquarters — a staging area before the visit and a quiet refuge after, free of the long lines at the Museum. Visitors came from far and wide — family driving in from St. Louis, old friends making a special trip — and each visit gave me a chance to experience the Exhibition through a visitor's eyes, dealing with the queues, navigating the galleries full of patrons and feeling the sense of awe amongst the crowd. The magic of the moment made it feel like a cultural block party and the long lines that often stretched around the block were a constant reminder that we were part of something very special.

Looking back on those wonderful seven weeks in the spring of 1975, I was probably too young to fully grasp the historical significance of what I was witnessing — but I sensed something extraordinary was happening. The Exhibition was a historic diplomatic moment in the Cold War era but equally important, it was living proof of how art brings people and nations together. I knew that the priceless cultural artifacts had crossed the Pacific bearing four thousand years of a civilization that visitors were seeing for the first time — and had arrived in the American heartland at a turning point in history. But at the end of my shift, I was still twenty-something, the pay was modest, and by five in the morning I was exhausted and mostly thinking about breakfast and sleep.

What I could not have known was how enduring those graveyard hours would prove to be. After more than fifty years, when I close my eyes and

think back on those nights at the Museum, I can still hear the bronze bells echoing through the galleries and see the lithe, powerful figure of the Flying Horse of Gansu and I am forever grateful for the memories the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art gave me that spring of 1975.

Archival Materials

- **The-Exhibit-Poster.png** — Official exhibit poster featuring the Galloping Horse, April 20–June 7, 1975 (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **The-Prancing-Horse.jpg** — Cover of the Exhibit program, *The Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China* (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **Lines-at-the-Museum.jpg** — Exterior photograph of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum showing crowds queued outside beneath the exhibit banner (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **Crowds-at-the-Museum.jpg** — Interior photograph showing the packed galleries with American and Chinese flags and calligraphy banners (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **Map-of-the-Exhibit.jpg** — Newspaper floor plan of the exhibition maze with artifact photographs, captioned "entrance-to-exit view of the exhibition maze" (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **A-Chime-of-Bronze-Bells.png** — Exhibit catalog page featuring the Western Zhou Dynasty bronze bells (courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives)
- **Chinese_Bells.mp3** — Audio recording of Chinese bells similar to what was played at the Exhibit [courtesy of the Smithsonian

Museum]

- **VIDEO_Chinese-Exhibit-at-the-Nelson-Atkins-1975.mp4** — Video footage of visitors at the Exhibit, including a delegation from Denver Museum of Nature and Science. [courtesy of Denver Museum of Nature & Science, IV.MOV-703-3]
- **50year-Nelson-Atkins-celebration.jpg** — Program announcement for "50 Years On: Remembering The Exhibition of the Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China," Spencer Art Reference Library, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, April 10–June 2, 2025

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